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Old Topsy

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Old Topsy

By Richard F. Silver

YEP, WE CALLS the mountain "Old Topsy". Don't know how it ever got that name; reckon 'cause it first grewed. Caint see no other reason for it.

'Taint much of a mountain when it comes to size, but she's purty just the same. 'Specially when fall comes and all them leaves turn red and yellor. I can sit here on the front porch and look at her by the hour. May says it's just laziness that gits me, but I don't know. It's the only purty thing I have got to look at. But to really 'preciate Old Topsy you got to climb her. She'll fool you! She's got the purtiest little lake atop her you ever did see. Ain't no fish in it; sure wish they were. She's all rock bottom, forty-foot deep in places, and jes as clear as she can be.

That tumble-down shack that you see down the valley, back over there by them jack oaks, that's Jed Marshall's old place. He and his family used to live there years ago, what family he had. There was jes him and his wife and two kids. Jed never did have much git-up to him, and that white-oak soil is jes as poor as it can be, but he used to raise a little corn down on the river bottom and kept some sheep out on the brush back yonder. Jed kept body and soul together for his family somehow or other but it was mighty tough goin' sometimes. He was awful religious, used to read the Bible every evening 'fore he went to bed, and went around quoting scripture all the time. If he had done more loving and less quoting, things mighta turned out different, but here—I'm getting ahead of myself.

JED WAS powerful big, but his wife was jes a dried-up little old woman that looked like a puff o' wind would come along and blow her away some day; but she thought a lot of that boy and girl of hers. When they first moved in from down Arkansaw way, the boy was just a baby, but Jenny, that's the girl, was about ten. I remember the first time I saw her she was wearing

her black hair in pigtails down her back, and her mother had 'em all braided up nice and big with a blue bow on 'em. I could tell right off she was mighty proud of Jenny's looks, even then.

Well, sir, seven or eight years rolled by, and each year Jenny kept a-growing and getting purtier all the time, and all the time her mother kept getting prouder and prouder of her. Jenny used to come over and sit on the porch and talk to me by the hour and Lord, if I'd a been forty years younger, I'd a-fallen in love with her myself. Her eyes was jes as soft as a rabbit's, and big—why, they covered half her face. Somehow when I looked in 'em they looked so deep they reminded me of the lake up on Old Topsy. Kinda funny too; I used to think about that later.

THERE WAS plenty of young fellows that used to come and call on Jenny, but she soon showed her pick. It was young Asa Fellows, who lived down the river a ways. He was a likely looking young fellow, deep-chested, and jes as straight as one of them cedars yonder. He and Jenny was jes as thick as two thieves. I used to see him ride up the valley every Sunday to Marshell's, and afternoons, like as not, he and Jenny would climb Old Topsy and sit up by the lake where it's always cool. I mind one time my son Jim said he run across them up there while he was squirrel-hunting, and they was a-kissing and holding hands jes as loving as they could be.

Well, it wasn't long till they announced as how they was going to be married in a month, and Jenny and her mother was jes as busy and as happy as they could be. I remember Ma starting sewing some pillow-slips for them. But she never finished them, for things started happening.

Asa's team ran away one day while he was goin' over to Hamilton. Threwed him clean out of the wagon and hit his head against a tree. Killed him jes as dead as a hammer. Sure was too bad for Jenny, for Ma and I went to the funeral, and she jes cried as though her heart would break. And I guess it did, for Jenny was never quite the same afterward.

About a week afterwards Jenny came over and set with me awhile, but she didn't have nothing to say. She jes sit there and looked at Old Topsy a-rearing up before us, with her green trees all a-rustling in the breeze. I didn't say nothing either 'cause I knew the poor kid had plenty to think about without me a-bothering her.

After that I used to see Jenny climb to the peak of Old Topsy 'bout every day. Sometimes she'd be alone and sometimes she'd have her little brother with her. I guess she used to sit up there on the bank of the lake and mourn over Asa.

A MONTH or two went by in the same way, and then all hell broke loose in earnest. Jenny and Asa had been kind o' hasty with their love making and she was goin' to have a baby. Finally she and her mother couldn't keep it from old Jed any longer, and when they told him the sanctimonious old fool jes about had a fit. He started quoting scripture right away and called Jenny a "woman taken in adultery" and flung the Seventh Commandment in her face. There wasn't any living with the old man; he thought as how he had a duty to perform, and he made Jenny's life miserable a-preaching at her and a-quoting the Bible all day long. Things got so bad that Jed's wife jes wouldn't stand for it no longer and tried her best to stop him 'cause it was breaking Jenny's heart, what with Asa's death and all this new trouble a-piling on her. But they wan't no stopping him.

Well, I guess it got so bad that Jenny jes couldn't stand it no longer. I remember that afternoon plain. 'Twas long in October like, and Old Topsy was at her purtiest, and there was a blue haze a-hanging down low over all jes like it does in Indian summer. It was powerful warm that day too, and only jes enough of a breeze to make the cottonwoods rustle, and I was sitting here on the porch looking at all them red and yellor-leaved white oaks over on Old Topsy when I saw Jenny and her little brother go a-creeping up her side, and I thought as how they was going up to the lake where 'twas cool.

I'd kind of dozed off, I guess, when I heard someone a-coming, a-running along scattering the dead leaves, and I looks up and here was the Marshall kid all out of breath and crying fit to break his heart. He sobbed something or other about Jenny and the lake and that was all I could get out of him, but I 'spected the worst somehow, and sent Jim—that's my boy—who was working out back of the house a-digging potatoes, hot-foot up there to see what was wrong, and I followed as fast as my old legs would carry me.

Jenny must have tried to settle her troubles in her own way, for when I got up there, Jim had her stretched out on the bank, a-working over her, but 'twan't no use; she was

drownded dead. The boy had set the alarm pretty general by then, and when Jed and his wife got there, they was quite a crowd gathered. Jed's wife jes gave one look at Jenny and moaned sorta low-like, then set down beside her a-crying soft-like and running her fingers through Jenny's hair until I couldn't help but think of how she used to braid it up so nice and put ribbons in it and purty it up all she could.

Marshells don't live there any more; Jed's wife and the boy moved back down Arkansaw way where they come from, after Jed got killed.

Yep, Jed got killed. Seems like trouble kinda comes in threes, don't it? First Asa getting killed, and then Jenny a-drowning herself, and then Jed only a couple of days after Jenny's funeral. Him and his wife was a-sitting in the kitchen, and Jed was cleaning his gun when it went off accidental-like and shot him dead. Right through the heart.

Kinda funny too; for all his being queer on religion, I never thought Jed Marshall would be such a fool as to try and clean a loaded gun!



Impulse

By Alice Wortman

WHEN I see a blank wall,
 I want charcoal
 to make unrestrained, indiscriminate
 marks on it—
 circles and rhomboids,
 reeling triangles,
 meaningless lines.
 That is what you did to me.
 I want to write
 I H A T E Y O U
 In letters a mile high
 But no one could ever see them,
 not even you!